The Fire-Warden

By Robert W. Chambers

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"The Maids of Paradise," "Cardigan," "The Maid At-Arms," "The King in Yellow."

SYNOPSIS: The story opens with Burleson, a wealthy young man who had just bought a large hunting reserve, talking with a few country folk at the village store. It seems that Grier the former owner, had been relentless in dealing with the villagers who persisted in hunting on his property. They hated Grier. Quite naturally young Burleson was regarded in the same light and the villagers were set upon shooting and trapping his game and destroying his forests. He tried to explain that he was going to be fair with them—his neighbors—and even invited them to his house. But they did not understand his intentions nor did he understand them. Failing in his efforts to come to an understanding with the little group at the store, he rode away to his estate. Unexpectedly he came upon Abe Storm, a hunter and trapper, and after a few words ordered him off the premises. Burleson had sent word by one of his keepers to Mr. Elliott, the fire warden of the estate to meet him at a certain place. The warden was sick with the rheumatism but sent word that he would send his deputy. The appointment was kept by the deputy—the warden's daughter. Together they rode to the place where the grass had been set on fire. They found a fresh fire. All Burleson's men were called upon to put it out. When finally the fire was in control one of the keepers found a belt with Abe Storm's name on it—the man who started the fire. Burleson was red with rage but controlled himself and in sheer desperation sat down beside the girl and said, "Tell me about these people."

Her sensitive instinct had followed the little drama from her vantage-seat on the knoll; she had seen the patrol display the belt; she had watched the color die out and then flood the young man's face and neck; and she had read the surface signs of the murderous fury that altered his own visage to a mask set with a pair of blazing eyes. And suddenly, as he dropped to the ground beside her, his question had swept aside formality, leaving them on the very edge of an intimacy which she had accepted, unconsciously, with her low-voiced answer.

"Yes—your own people. Tell what I should know. I want to live in peace among them if they'll let me."

She gathered her knees in her clasped fingers and looked out into the forest. "Mr. Burleson," she said, "for every mental, every moral deformity, man is answerable to man. You dwellers in the pleasant places of the world are pitiless in your judgment of the sullen, suspicious, narrow life you find edging forests, clinging to mountain flanks or stupidly stifling in the heart of some vast plain. I cannot understand the mental cruelty which condemns with contempt human creatures who have had no chance—not one single chance. Are they ignorant? Then beat with them for shame! Are they envious, grasping, narrow? Do they gossip about neighbors, do they slander without mercy? What can you expect from starved minds, human intellects unnourished by all that you find so wholesome? Man's progress only inspires man; man's mind alone stimulates man's mind. Where civilization is, there are many men; where is the greatest culture, the broadest thought, the sweetest toleration, there men are many, teaching one another unconsciously, consciously, always advancing, always uplifting, spite of the shallow tide of sin which flows in the footsteps of all progress."

She ceased; her delicate, earnest face relaxed, and a smile glimmered for a moment in her eyes, in the pretty curled corners of her parted lips.

"I'm talking very like a schoolmarm," she said. "I am one, by-the-way, and I teach the children of these people—er—people," she added, with an exquisite hint of defiance in her smile.

She rested her weight on one arm and leaned towards him a trifle.

"In Fox Cross-roads, there is much that is hopeless, much that is sorrowful, Mr. Burleson; there is hunger, bodily hunger, there is sickness unsolaced by spiritual or bodily comfort—not even the comfort of death! Ah, you should see them once! Once would be enough! And no physician, nobody that knows, I tell you, nobody through the long, dusty, stifling summers—nobody through the lengthening bitterness of the black winters—nobody except myself. Mr. Burleson, old man Storm died craving a taste of broth; and Abe Storm trapped a partridge for him, and Rolfe caught him and Grier jailed him—and confiscated the miserable, half-plucked bird!"

The hand which supported her weight was clinched; she was not looking at the man beside her, but his eyes never left hers.

"You talk angrily of market hunting, and the law forbids it. You say you can respect a poacher who shoots for the love of it, but you have only contempt for the market hunter. And you are right sometimes." She looked him in the eyes. "Old Santry's little girl is bedridden. Santry shot and sold a deer—and bought his child a patent bed. She sleeps almost a whole hour now without much pain."

Burleson, eyes fixed on her, did not stir. The fire-warden leaned forward, picked up the belt, and read the name scratched with a hunting-knife on the brass buckle.

"Before Grier came," she said, thoughtfully, "there was misery enough here—cold, hunger, disease—oh, plenty of disease always. Their starved lands of sand and rock gave them a little return for heart-breaking labor, but not enough. Their rifles helped them to keep alive; timber was free; they existed. Then suddenly forest, game, vine, and lake were taken from them—fenced off, closed to these people whose fathers' fathers had established free thoroughfare where posted warnings and shot-gun patrols now block every trodden trail! What is the sure result"—and Grier was brutal! What could be expected? Why, Mr. Burleson, these people are Americans!—dwarfed mentally, stunted morally, year by year reverting to primal type—yet the fire in their blood set their grandfathers marching on Saratoga!—marching to accomplish the destruction of all kings! And Grier drove down here with a coachman and footman in livery and fure, and summoned the constable from Brier Bridge, and arrested old man Santry at his child's bedside—the new bed paid for with Grier's buck . . ."

She paused; then, with a long breath, she straightened up and leaned back once more against the tree.

"They are not born criminals," she said. "See what you can do with them—see what you can do for them, Mr. Burleson. The relative values of a deer and a man have changed since they hanged poachers in England."

They sat silent for a while, watching the men below.

"Miss Elliott," he said, impulsively, "may I not know your father?"

She flushed and turned towards him as though unpleasantly startled. That was only instinct, for almost at the same moment she leaned back quietly against the tree.

"I think my father would like to know you," she said. "He seldom sees men—men like himself."

"Perhaps you would let me smoke a cigarette, Miss Elliott?" he ventured.

"You were very silly not to ask me before," she said, unconsciously falling into his commonplace vein of easy deference.

"I wonder," he went on, lazily, "what that debris is on the land which runs back from the store at Fox Cross-roads. It can't be that anybody was simple enough to go boring for oil."

She winced; but the smile remained on her face, and she met his eyes quite calmly.

"That pile of debris," she said, "is, I fancy, the wreck of the house of Elliott. My father did bore for oil and found it—about a pint, I believe."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," cried Burleson, red as a pippin.

"I am not a bit sensitive," she said. Her mouth, the white, heavy lids of her eyes, contradicted her.

"There was a very dreadful smash-up of the house of Elliott, Mr. Burleson. If you feel a bit friendly towards that house, you will advise me how I may sell 'The Witch.' I don't mind telling you why. My father has simply got to go to some place where rheumatism can be helped—he made bearable. I know that I could easily dispose of the mare if I were in a civilized region; even Grier offered half her value. If you know of any people who care for that sort of horse, I'll be delighted to enter into brisk correspondence with them."

"I know a man," observed Burleson, deliberately, "who would buy that mare in about nine-tenths of a second."

"Oh, I'll concede him the other tenth!" cried the girl, laughing. It was the first clear, carefree laugh he had heard from her—and so fascinating, so delicious, that he sat there silent in entranced surprise.

"About the value of the mare," she suggested, diffidently, "you may tell your friend that she is only worth what father paid for her—"

"Good Lord!" he said, "that's not the way to sell a horse!"

"Why not? Isn't she worth that much?"

"What did your father pay for her?"

The girl named the sum a trifle anxiously. "It's a great deal, I know—"

"It's about a third what she's worth," announced Burleson. "If I were you, I'd add seventy-five per cent. and hold out like—like a demon for it."

"But I cannot ask more than we paid."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Is it honorable?"

They looked at each other for a moment, then he began to laugh. To her surprise, she felt neither resentment nor chagrin, although he was plainly laughing at her. So presently she laughed, too, a trifle uncertainly, shy eyes avoiding his, yet always returning curiously. She did not know just why; she was scarcely aware that she took pleasure in the lean-faced young horseman's company.

"I have always believed," she began, "that to sell anything for more than its value was something as horrid as—as money."

"Such a transaction resembles usury as closely as it does the theory of Pythagoras," he explained; and presently their laughter aroused the workmen, who looked, leaning on spade and pick.

"I cannot understand," she said, "why you make such silly remarks or why I laugh at them. A boy once affected me in the same way—years ago."

She sat up straight, a faint smile touching her mouth and eyes. "I think that my work is about ended here, Mr. Burleson. Do you know that my pupils are enjoying a holiday because you choose to indulge in a forest-fire?"

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"He drew her closer and lifted her flushed face."

to a new empire. And, like the ear-

West Bound

this long and narrow grave?"

Dean F. B. Mumford of the Missouri